

The Causes of Wars and the Developing Global Crisis

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This paper connects some ultimate causes of wars through history with a set of contemporary problems we have been calling the “Developing Global Crisis” for about 20 years. ¹

Therefore, one first step is identifying what that crisis entails.

Very briefly, the living system that sustains all of our global civilizations is in great distress these days. ² This leads to many armed conflicts and even “failed states.” Sometimes failed states produce terrorists and large numbers of other desperate people who flee the chaos that results. Former US Director of National Intelligence, General James Clapper provides an apt description of the Developing Global Crisis on page 157 of his 2018 memoirs: “Factors like food and water shortages and poor living conditions – increasingly driven by climate change – oppression of political freedoms, corruption by autocratic governments and rulers who had been in place for decades ... made them (North African and some Middle Eastern states) extremely unstable.” ³ The spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) threatens Everything under Heaven, because many terrorists want WMD and are not deterred by threats of retaliation.

There are at least 40 recurring causes of wars through history, so we cannot consider them all in the time available. Today we will focus on four especially important ultimate causes of wars. They are Population Pressure, Militant Religion, Authoritarian Law, and Corruptions of Governance. ⁴ The case of contemporary Syria will be examined briefly to illustrate connections between these causes of organized armed conflict and many other problems. ⁵

There is also a particular reason why I came to China. This is called “Thucydides’ Trap” which is a theory about great power relations of Harvard political scientist Graham Allison, inspired by an ancient Greek historian named Thucydides. ⁶ Thucydides wrote about the Peloponnesian War that ended Greece’s dominance of the Eastern Mediterranean and Western civilization ⁷ about the same time that Sun Tzu wrote his incomparable “Art of War.” ⁸ Allison’s more recent theory suggests that when one “great power” declines while another great power rises, war between them is almost inevitable.

China obviously rises while America obviously declines, but since each has huge armies and many hundreds of nuclear weapons, war between us would be a catastrophe for the entire earth. Therefore, I travel around the world to work for peace and dispute ideas that any such war is inevitable. Thucydides wrote during the same epoch as many Chinese philosophers like

Confucius and Lao Tzu. Some call this an “axial age” of great thinkers.⁹ So I consult them too, but Sun Tzu is especially relevant so I have quoted him often in the West, and today in China.

First, the example of contemporary Syria will be considered. Syria has destroyed itself because of those forces mentioned before, Population Pressure, Militant Religion, Authoritarian Law, and Corruptions of Governance. Since 2011 Syria has degenerated into many warring factions that have displaced half its population, killed at least ½ million of its 22 million people, and caused at least 6 million Syrians to flee to other countries.^{10, 11}

Much commentary on this conflict focuses on the personalities and actions of key leaders like Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russia’s Vladimir Putin. Others focus on emergent evils like terrorism and death cults like the self-named Islamic State (which is neither Islamic nor a state). But focus on such people and issues obscures observing more fundamental factors.

Before the current conflict, in 2010, the population growth rate (GR) in Syria was about 2.4% per year.¹²

A growth rate of 2.4%, if sustained, means a population will double in less than 30 years ($dt \sim 70/GR$). Good farming land and pure water does not double that fast, if at all. So population pressure rises. In fact, positive trends of economic development can turn negative very fast in such circumstances. These reversals are often called “tipping points.”

Syria also experienced the worst drought in its recorded history during the four years prior to outbreak of the current conflicts there. This resulted in at least 1.5 million poor farmers fleeing barren agricultural land for cities that were already full of people seeking scarce opportunities.¹³

These large population pressures interacted with the endemic corruption of the Syrian government. Bashar al-Assad had long reserved the best opportunities for his Alawite prime constituency. He gave other opportunities to allies among the Christian and other minorities. This left little opportunity for the Sunni and Shiite majority of the people of Syria.

Peaceful protests began over corruptions of governance. Security forces overreacted, and oppression morphed into civil wars. Leadership matters a lot, but Bashar al-Assad would have been faced with a very difficult problem whether he was an angel of mercy or a potted plant. His father had treated Syria like a Mafia estate for decades prior. So Assad’s security forces tried the old methods of repression to control unrest and protest.

Meanwhile, militant religion was increasing in the region. So the authoritarian security forces ran into fanatic, and increasingly well-armed Islamic “jihadists” inspired by ISIS and decades of fundamentalist religious education funded mainly by Saudi Arabia. Resulting religious and political rhetoric tends to obscure the more powerful demographic forces at work, and the pervasive corruptions of governance that prevented durable solutions.

Many external states provided money, weapons and propaganda to fuel this fire. If WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) had entered this conflict, the entire world would be at risk. Instead, only half a million Syrians lost their lives as the country destroyed itself, and many millions more fled, transmitting huge population pressures to every neighbor except Israel, especially Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

Syria is one tragic case of a larger, global problem. I came to China to study what Confucius, Lao Tzu and Sun Tzu might say about such problems from their graves over 2,000 years old. I learned that Confucius seldom if ever spoke about war.¹⁴ But he often said that the ultimate purpose of government is the welfare of the common people (who are always hurt worst by wars). And as you well know, 孔子 also urged us to cultivate universal virtues like benevolence, wisdom, courage, trustworthiness, reverence and recognition of duty.

I am here today because it is my duty to be here. What I know about war says that we must consult with the wisdom of sages, as best we can understand them and that.

When reading the Tao te Ching again (after 40 years) and struggling with many difficulties of translation I will spare you here,¹⁵ I noted that Lao Tzu observed:

1. The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way. (This speaks directly to the fanaticism of militant “religions.”)
2. Reduce the size and population of the state (if you want to end war) and
3. Ensure that even though the people have tools of war for a troop or a battalion, they will not use them.

Having considered Chinese and some Western sages, I like Lao Tzu best. But I think that Sun Tzu has the most important advice for generals of armies and for leaders of nations.

So I will repeat for you some words that I have cited often at peace conferences and in papers for Western war and intelligence colleges. They are the wisest advice I have ever read for generals and leaders of nations. They are all from Sun Tzu’s “Art of War.”

“Generally, in war the best policy is to take a state intact; to ruin it is inferior to this. To capture the enemy’s army is better than to destroy it; to take intact a battalion, a company, or a five-man squad is better than to destroy them. For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.” Book 3: 1-3, followed by:

“If not in the interests of the state, do not act. If you cannot succeed, do not use troops. If you are not in danger, do not fight. A sovereign cannot raise an army because he is enraged, nor can a general fight because he is resentful. For while an angered man may again be happy, and a resentful man again be pleased, a

state that has perished cannot be restored, nor can the dead be brought back to life. Therefore, the enlightened ruler is prudent and the good general is warned against rash action. Thus the state is kept secure and the army preserved.”

Book 12: 17-19.

Having considered carefully all these things, what are my solutions? It is much easier to describe problems than to define actual, practical solutions, especially with ultimate causes of wars, which are very difficult things to change.

For Population Pressure: Gently reducing growth rates of human populations is essential. China has done the most of any country on that. This is one reason for its great economic growth during recent decades. Africa has done the least, and sees endemic wars and enduring poverty.

For Militant Religions: Religions have a great positive and a great negative. All organized religions contain both. The negative is the false belief that their way is the only correct way. Thus the wisdom of Lao Tzu’s first lines in his Tao te Ching, where he declares: “The way that can be spoken of, is not the constant Way.” (author’s emphases). The positive side of religions is love. Therefore, the devout of all nations need to do a better job of restraining their violent, fundamentalist colleagues. One way is pointing out (persistently) that no God of the Universe wants us to kill each other’s children over transient and ephemeral political arguments.

For Authoritarian Law: Finding a better balance between authoritarian efficiency and individual freedom would help a lot. This is central to the “Great Harmony” I referred to between Eastern and Western civilizations. So when in China, I work for 大和谐.

For Corruptions of Governance: Well that is a difficult problem everywhere! In the West we say that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”¹⁶ But governments need power to solve problems. Finding the proper balance here is a problem for every government and citizen on earth today. Good Luck!!

Thank you for considering my thoughts about how to improve the prospects for survival of our civilizations in our time.

¹ Andregg, Michael, On the Causes of War, St. Paul, MN: Ground Zero Minnesota, 1997, 1999, 2007. This book won a National Peacewriting Award in the USA in 1999, and can be accessed at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5750629760b5e9d6697be6cd/t/59963a81d482e9edaffa67ed/1503017604395/On+the+Causes+of+War.pdf>

² Kolbert, Elizabeth, The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History, Picador, 2015. This book won a Pulitzer Prize.

³ Clapper, James, with Troy Brown, Facts and Fears: Hard Truths from a Life in Intelligence, New York, NY: Viking Books, 2018, p. 157-8.

⁴ These are covered in three chapters from the book On the Causes of War cited above. Those are chapter 12 (Population Pressure, pp. 62-73), chapter 13 (Authoritarian Law and Militant Religion, pp. 74-83) and chapter 14 (Corruptions of Governance, pp. 84-94).

⁵ Andregg, Michael, “The Developing Global Crisis and the Current Wave of Migrant / Refugees Heading for Europe,” presented for the 21st “Intelligence in the Knowledge Society” conference of the National Intelligence Academy of Romania, *Mihai Viteazul*, 16 October, 2015, and published in their proceedings accessible at: <http://iksconference.ro/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Proceedings-IKS-2015-1.pdf>

⁶ Allison, Graham, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* Houghton Mifflin, 2017. Prof. Allison is credited with creating or at least popularizing the term “Thucydides’s Trap” in a September 24, 2015 *Atlantic* article followed by the 2017 book cited above. He concludes that the odds of avoiding catastrophic war are only about 1 in 4, based on 16 historic cases, but that avoiding the catastrophic war remains the only rational option at this time.

⁷ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by Rex Warner in 1954 (London: Penguin, 1986 ed.). This most quoted passage of this classic reference occurs on page 49 of the 1986 edition, Book 1: 23.

⁸ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, as translated by Samuel B. Griffith in the Oxford University Press edition of 1963, London, UK.

⁹ “Axial age” refers to the period from ~ 800-300 BCE, when new ways of thinking appeared in Persia, India, China and the Greco-Roman world in religion and philosophy. The term is ascribed to German philosopher Karl Jaspers. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Axial_Age for more details.

¹⁰ Park, Jeanine, “Europe’s Migration Crisis” published by the Council on Foreign Relations, USA, 13 September, 2015.

¹¹ *UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response/Total Persons of Concern*. UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 29 August 2015.

¹² CIA World FactBook, 2010, demographics of Syria.

¹³ Liverani, Andrea, “A Syrian Refugee at COP21” in a World Bank publication, 21 October, 2015, accessible at: <http://blogs.worldbank.org/peoplemove/syrian-refugee-cop21>

¹⁴ Confucius, *The Analects*, translated by DC Lau, London: Penguin Classics, 1963, 1978.

¹⁵ Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, translated by DC Lau in 1963, London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1978, especially Appendix 1 on “The Problem of Authorship” pp. 147-162.

¹⁶ Acton, Lord John Emerich Edward Dalberg, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887 where Lord Acton made this most famous of his many quotes. Its history can be accessed at <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/absolute-power-corrupts-absolutely.html>